

if budget will increase their taxes



Deputy Sherman County Attorney Brock Abbey (from left) met with Sherman County Commissioners Cynthia Strnad, Max Linin and Larry Enfield with County Clerk Janet Rumpel taking minutes. – Photo by Tom Betz/The Goodland Star-News

A few user fees bringing in additional money, the largest being the county solid waste fee, which brings in about \$330,000 a year to help pay for the landfill and transfer station.

Total expenses for solid waste run around \$873,000 a year. The income includes the tipping fees the county collects from the local trash collection services. Subtracted is the monthly payment to In the Can as the county contractor to haul trash.

Over the past 10 years, property tax has dropped by 2 percent as a percent of total revenue while sales tax has increased by 89 percent, mostly coming from the increased sales tax for streets and roads that brings in about \$1 million a year to pay off bonds.

In 2001, the property tax was 46 percent of total income, sales tax 12 percent, special highway (from state motor fuel taxes) 6 percent and other (mostly solid waste) 36 percent. By 2009, the property tax had dropped to 38

percent, sales tax had increased to 19 percent, special highway had dropped to 4 percent and other had grown to 39 percent.

Looking at the inflation factor, what the property tax paid for in 1990 at \$1,759,776 would cost \$2,897,809 in 2010.

On the spending side, inflation means the \$3,185,029 spent in 1990 would equal \$5,244,761 in 2010, an increase of 64.7 percent.

The total county employment has remained fairly even over the years, with a person being added in the county attorney's office and one cut from road and bridge. The county payroll has been under a merit raise system for several years, and has been basically frozen for the past two.

The commissioners have granted some raises to sheriff's deputies and to road and bridge grader operators during that time. The raises were designed to bring the deputies up to the

pay level of other sheriff departments in the area and to reward the grader operators for an improvements in the roads over the past year. Some other raises have been granted when recommended by a department supervisor.

Commissioners spent time last year looking at ways to cut county spending, and made some cuts in money given to groups to help pay for special events and programs, such as the Fourth of July Freedom Fest, the Flatlander Fall Festival, Sherman County Historical Society, Carnegie Arts Center, Western Plains Chute-Out and other programs. At a budget work session in August, commissioners continued to look for ways to do more with less tax money.

This year, they face the need to replace the heating and air conditioning systems in the courthouse. The plan will cost about \$600,000, and the county is doing a lease/purchase for \$200,000 with Western State Bank

at 3.5 percent interest and will use capital reserves for the rest.

The county had been asked to take over operation of the ambulance service, but it appears Goodland Regional Medical Center will continue to operate the service for another year under a new contract. The county would be responsible for replacing ambulances and will continue to give the hospital about \$65,000 a year from the health-services sales tax.

Pressures continue to mount on county services, and the commissioners continue to try to find ways to balance the budget and prevent the property tax rate from going up again like it did between 2009, when it was 55.97 mills, and 2010, when it jumped to 69.45 mill. The increase came because the county had used most of its reserves the previous year, and to maintain services even after making some cuts, commissioners had to increase the property-tax levy.



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